

Census 2001 Review and Evaluation

November 2004

Census Access: Interim Evaluation Report

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ONS is carrying out a review and evaluation of the 2001 Census in England and Wales which will culminate in a Data Quality report being published, followed by a General Report.

Plans for individual reports on specific aspects of the Census operation and a timetable for release have been published.

Each report is written in isolation and is subject to amendments as processing progresses and further information comes to light.

Reports will be released on the ONS website in the form of a high level Executive Summary and a more detailed Evaluation Report.

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Key achievements

Access to the main results of the 2001 Census is free and use is unrestricted. This is a major change from previous censuses which was brought about in England and Wales by the Census Access project.

Aims

The initial aims of the project were to modernise the way a major part of Census output was disseminated by:

- making it free at the point of use to any user by up-front recovery of costs;
- delivering it in user friendly and largely electronic ways; and
- removing restrictions to joined-up use.

Changes to the dissemination methods were also made to align with wider policy on Government information and to meet the needs of Census users. Benefits were described at the project's inception as

".....delivering the results of the Census in mainly electronic and user-friendly ways from a dataset of statistics with a geographic base and supporting metadata. It will provide the public sector with evidence for policy making and evaluation, especially in the area of social exclusion and at the neighbourhood level"

The project was initiated to run from 2000 to 2003, but has been extended for a further two years to cover all the main results. It has delivered its main objectives, but a final evaluation will be made in 2005.

Census Access complements the projects covering Output Policy (www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/proj_opad.asp) and Production (www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/proj_op.asp) which have been evaluated separately. It also reflects the distinctive impact of Census legislation on dissemination, and this is explained in the following section.

Background

Census legislation and the initiation of the project

The dissemination of Census results is governed by two parts of the Census Act 1920. Section 2.3 provides central funding in effect making the data free. Section 4 requires Census reports to be made to Parliament, which are priced to cover the costs of wider publication, and allows further output to be commissioned with the recovery of additional marginal costs.

Most of the important local results of a Census are supplied on a cost recovery basis. They are simply too voluminous to put in reports to Parliament.

Up to and including the 1991 Census there were elaborate schemes to share such costs among users by charging each only a part of the total cost, and to apply restrictive terms to supply to third parties to prevent loss of income. However, it became clear in consultations before 2001 that such an approach was incompatible with wider Government policies to make information freely available and would fail to meet user needs. ONS therefore initiated a project – Census Access – with the aim of removing the barrier of cost recovery and of delivering the main results of the 2001 Census in an unrestricted, user friendly and electronic way to be free to all at the point of use – in summary, to help break down barriers to joined up working with Census information.

Wider policy on information

The direction taken in Census Access was given momentum by developments in wider policies on Government information. The National Statistics dissemination policy put emphasis on important information being free on the Internet. The 'Better Information' report of the Social Exclusion Policy Action Team 18 put emphasis on information being freely available. The Treasury report on a review of the knowledge economy put emphasis on the use of Government information in growth of e-commerce in the UK, and prefaced radical changes in arrangements for the re-use and publication of the information. In all, there was a strong policy shift from charging and constraints to improving access and making use of information that the Government already held.

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Approach

Support from the Invest to Save Budget and partners

The Census Access project received funds of some £3 million jointly from the Government's Invest to Save Budget (ISB) and project partners – the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the Department of Health, the National Assembly for Wales, the Local Government Association, and the Economic and Social Research Council – representing all public sector use. ISB provided some £2.1 million – amounting to 75 per cent of the projected costs - and the project partners added the remaining 25 per cent, as required by the terms of ISB funding.

This represented a substantial boost to the resources available for dissemination. Part of the initial funding for three years from 2000 was subsequently rolled forward to cover a further two years, but the project has remained within its original budget.

The ISB provides support through a competitive funding process for projects that involve two or more public bodies getting together to deliver innovative services. It offered an ideal opportunity to help break down the barriers to joint working with Census information. The project concept gained the support of key players among government bodies, the health service, local government, and the academic community, who in turn serve wider public needs. This was reflected in the partners in the project and bid. The award to ONS was made after an original field of around 500 applicants in the 1999 round was narrowed down to 104 successful bids.

The project set out to deliver a combination of new policy, modernised means of delivery, and a package of content which covered

- all standard local statistics
- extended tables with more detail
- a complete geographical framework
- supporting metadata and functionality
- output for areas changed after 2001
- unrestricted re-use and publication

to be delivered via a Web based service and in free-standing forms. A bonus for the partners was that some of the ISB funds were to help meet the cost of producing the local statistics and other content of the package.

Developments during the project

Significant changes in plans for dissemination took place in the first quarter of 2001. ONS was putting much greater emphasis on the use of the Web for dissemination, and it was decided that results from the 2001 Census would become a major part of the Web based Neighbourhood Statistics service from 2003 onwards. The Census output geography would also form the base for all Neighbourhood Statistics, and this degree of synergy resulted in a decision to provide a single Web access service to local statistics.

Web-based services

This decision was an important extension of the original aims of Census Access. It gave the benefit of a common entry point to much more than Census information alone, and the Census Access partners re-affirmed their commitment to the project under the new arrangement.

Under the changed arrangements, the Census Access project retained responsibility for the delivery of the project objectives, and these remained fundamentally unchanged. It also managed the ISB funds which met the costs of the integrated set of statistics, geography and metadata at the core of the project. But part of the project resources contributed to the development of the single Web service.

A UK wide service

ISB funding is generally only available for England, but, as a recognition of the coordination of the 2001 Census output strategy between the three UK Census organisations, the bid for ISB funding proposed that the project could be beneficially extended to cover the UK as a whole. In the event, ISB funding was used by the project to cover England and Wales, and parallel arrangements were made in Scotland through Scotland's Census Results OnLine (SCROL) and in Northern Ireland through the Northern Ireland Census Access (NICA).

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Assessment and lessons learned

Delivery of objectives

The Census took place on 29 April 2001. First results were laid before Parliament in September 2002. Results became available through Census Access from February 2003, with final phases of release in summer and autumn 2004. This was a more extended timetable than planned, with slippage caused by factors external to the project (summarised below), but the bulk of results were delivered by September 2003, and the project has remained within budget although extending from three to five years.

Objectives delivered to date

- Implementation of arrangements to make Census output free in effect to all end users whilst meeting the cost recovery requirements of the Census Act 1920.
- Bringing Census output under the HMSO 'click use' licensing scheme introduced in April 2001 for re-use and publication of Government information to permit unrestricted use, and doing so whilst retaining the commitment of the partners to fund the project.
- Saving the administrative costs of separately charging thousands of Census customers and of managing complicated licences, a saving which continues to be made.
- Contributing, through joint funding to the development of the Neighbourhood Statistics Web based service, and developing user friendly CDs and DVDs containing the entire standard results of the Census. Both services are free to end users and provide for both quick reference and in depth analysis.
- Designing the statistical content of the service through widespread consultation, and delivering it through modernised forms of access – providing some two billion counts in total.
- Carrying forward the preparation and delivering an innovative framework of output geography in digital form – Output Areas - viewable in detail in Neighbourhood Statistics and delivered on CDs in reusable form for Geographical Information Systems (GISs); the Output Area

has subsequently been adopted as a standard stable building brick for National Statistics, and as the basis for Super Output Areas.

- Preparing and maintaining the 2001 Census Output Prospectus as an introduction to the results of the Census and with links to all output and support information available on the Web.

In summary, the main standard results of the 2001 Census, with the geographical framework and supporting information, are now available free in effect to all end users for unrestricted use either in substantial summary form on the Web or in entirety on CD/DVD. There is also output for a wide range of geographical areas - parishes, wards, local authorities and regions, health areas, parliamentary constituencies, postal geography, towns and cities (urban areas) - as well as for the Output Areas.

This contrasts markedly with the 1991 and earlier Censuses:

- through a major change in dissemination policy: in 1991 there was an inefficient system of charges and restrictive conditions of use, whilst access is now free in effect, with cost recovery obligations met up front project in line with broader Government policies for making better use of information in the knowledge economy.
- through modernisation of the means of delivery: in 1991 there were many printed reports and results in electronic form were supplied on open reel tapes, whilst there is now the choice of the Web or user friendly CDs or DVDs as well as better but fewer printed reports.
- through streamlined and cost saving distribution: in 1991 there were complex price schedules and licences, whilst there is now one simple system for orders and very few financial transactions.

The main elements of the project have been rolled out in line with the strategy planned. The outcome has been very widely welcomed by users, particularly by those who add further value and by organisations which can now use the information in a joined up way without restriction.

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Quantifiable Benefits

A key aim of the project was to help realise the benefit of the investment in the Census through widespread, timely and coordinated application of the results to help inform decision making, and to help improve the quality and effectiveness of services delivered to the public. A further objective was to avoid the cost of a multiplicity of 'local' dissemination services by providing a better service from the centre.

However, a paradox of placing a multi-purpose and reusable source like the Census in the public domain is that a comprehensive assessment of benefits which was always difficult has become very difficult.

Nevertheless, there are a number of indications of the impact of improved access and availability of Census results:

- release of Census results through Neighbourhood Statistics generated a marked and sustained increase in the number of visitors to the Website;
- market research by MORI for ONS has found that the Census is the top 'brand' of National Statistics on the Web;
- the Census National Report on CD, covering every local authority and equivalent to the entire set of three printed volumes for each county in 1991, has been supplied to some 2,600 users;
- some 18,000 copies of CDs/DVDs had been supplied up to September 2004; and the new licensing scheme has attracted a fivefold increase in the intermediate suppliers adding value to the census results.

The delivery of results to users' desk tops in readily usable form has diminished the need for expenditure by third parties on primary manipulation of the data. However, this direct access still successfully coexists with the centralised service provided by the ESRC for the further and higher education sector and with the special software packages for Census analysis, such as SASPAC, used for example in the local government sector.

The benefits of having accessible Census results peaks shortly after release, given the ten year interval from the previous release, and in that sense the project has already paid off. But the substantial benefit of the service will continue until and beyond 2011, when the next Census is planned.

Extension of the project

The project was extended into a fourth year (2003-04) to cover delays to the production of statistical and geographical content due to 'upstream' factors external to the project. The main factors were additions to the processes to impute for under-coverage in the Census, additional checks on the quality of output, and compliance with a new National Statistics boundary change harmonization policy, which delayed the completion of Output Area production by some three months.

It was not possible, however, to complete the main output by March 2004. A review was initiated in September 2003 of possible risks of disclosure of confidential information through the statistics on workplaces which were part of the Census Access package. The review was not completed until February 2004, when it was decided that nearly all of the output could be produced as planned. This, together with some technical production problems, added six months to the timetable for release.

The Future

Although funding will end after March 2005, access and benefits will continue to be delivered through Neighbourhood Statistics. There will be progression improvements of the services available on the Website, and the Census information on the site will be retained as each batch of improvements is implemented. Output on free-standing media will continue to be available from Census Customer Services up to and beyond a 2011 Census.

A final report on the project will be submitted to the ISB secretariat at the Treasury at the end of the 2004-05 financial year, and when accepted will be attached here.

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Recommendations

Census Access was welcomed by users, and the directions set are very likely to have a significant impact on the plans for a 2011 Census. Users do not expect to return to the previous type of dissemination regime, although the assumption must be that the distinctive cost recovery requirements of the Census legislation will remain. If it is also assumed that relevant Government policy does not change, the overall recommendation is that a way should be devised of making 2011 output free at the point of use, with a project on the lines of Census Access. Indeed, an appropriate strategic commitment should be made at the earliest opportunity, so that all Census plans are made in the knowledge that access to results will be free to all.

There are likely, however, to be significant changes before 2011 in the way ONS produces and presents output. For presentation, there is likely to be less emphasis on sources and more emphasis on themes like 'local and regional' statistics from a range of sources. Census Access has already moved in this direction in the synergy with Neighbourhood Statistics, and plans for the future should be made in this context.

For production, the output strategy for a 2011 Census must include the commitment, as given in the White Paper on the 2001 Census, to keep abreast of technology, both in production and access. Although the scale and significance of a Census would make it a key driver for technological development, it cannot be assumed that the circumstances of 2001 would be repeated. Output may be produced through standard corporate tools from data in a single corporate repository. This might diminish costs to be recovered, but it might also tend to act against the production of large sets of standard statistics which are the basis for Census Access if the approach taken is output on demand.

The first step is to establish how the Census would fit into the corporate output presentation and production strategies, and in broad terms whether there is a demand for pre-planned standard Census output beyond reports to Parliament. If the outcome is that there would be significant and predictable costs of producing output and of developing access, arrangements for up front cost recovery should be made comparatively earlier in a 2011 programme than the first action on Census Access in 1999. This would remove uncertainty from the main phase of consultation on output.

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Census Topics	Target Dates for Release
Legislation	Published
Non-Compliance (Executive Summary Only)	Published
Data Needs	Published
Geography	Published (Executive Summary)
Publicity	Published
Data Collection Development	Published
Data Collection Support	Published
Census Coverage Survey	Published
Processing	Published
Annex: Quality of Data Capture and Coding	Published
Downstream Processing	Published (Executive Summary)
Data Quality	
- Question non-response rates	Published
- Disclosure Control (Executive Summary only)	Published
- Data Validation (Executive Summary only)	Published
Edit & Imputation	Published
One Number Census	
- Quality Assurance	Published
- Lessons learnt (Executive Summary only)	Published
Output Policy	Published (Executive Summary)
Output Production	
- Part 1:Review of Output Released to date	Published (Executive Summary)
- Part 2:including Sample of Anonymised Records (SARs)/Origin Destination Matrices	Published
Census Access	Published
Programme Management	Published (Executive Summary)
Quality Report	Published
General Report	Published

Please note that the dates for release of individual evaluation reports noted above are target dates, and therefore subject to change. For the latest information please visit www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/reviewevaluation.asp